

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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Lee Hanssen
REGENERATE: Living Abundantly
2 Corinthians 8:1-5**

Good morning, everybody. My name is Lee Hanssen, and I have the privilege of serving here as the director of Student Ministries. For those of you who don't know me very well, my personality seems to lend itself to enjoying difficult conversations and awkward topics. We are in this series of generosity as a whole and today I get to talk to you about money. It's not because I drew the short straw. I actually asked to because I think that money is really, really important. No matter what age you are in this room, this is an important message for you. If you are a young person, if you are a kid and not learning how to be a generous giver with your finances, it's going to be really hard to get in those habits when you have more. And if you are somewhere between a kid and a real adult, which is kind of where I feel I most appropriately belong, I want to invite us out of the mentality that we will become generous givers once our student loans are paid off and once the wedding is paid for and our mortgage is a little bit more under control. Or if you are in this congregation and you are sitting in this room and regularly engaged in the tithing of your finances, I want this to be an encouragement and a reminder of the why and the privilege it is to give of our finances.

As I was processing what I wanted to share with you today, I tried to think of the first time I really started to think about money and notice the financial world. It was in about third grade when I was at an interesting birthday party. I showed up at my friend's house, which looked more like a compound, and I was greeted by all these men in black suits with little earpieces. Well, those were her security guards. I walked into this room and there were these gift bags lined up for all of us. I had never been to a party and received a gift. I was used to going to parties and giving gifts. I opened up this gift bag and there was a t-shirt with my name embroidered on it. Then we jumped in a limo and went to a fondue restaurant like most third-grade birthday parties. In that process and also throughout middle school, what I started to learn was that kids with lots of money were treated differently. As I grew up in this society, what was affirmed over and over to me was that money makes you important and because I wanted to be important, money became very important to me.

Fast forward a couple of years. As I began to walk with Jesus and understand God's design for money, my fist that was once clenched like this has begun to slowly open as God redeemed my view of the stewardship of my finances. In our fallen condition, we have an inaccurate view of what our finances were intended for, but God's Word says,

21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also [Matthew 6:21].

And we treasure our money, don't we? When I think about giving my money away and this idea of tithing, it's really hard for me because I have been taught that money equals security. It's hard

for me because I have experienced that having more than others makes me feel good about myself. It's hard for me because I like to live above my means. At my worst, I am selfish. What's even harder than thinking about giving my money away is actually doing it because when we give our money away, we enter into a lifestyle of sacrificing. When we give of our finances, there are going to be times when we will not feel secure financially, and I hate feeling insecure. There will be times when we will have to let go of feeling bigger and better than other people, and I don't know about you, but I hate feeling small. And there will be times when we are going to have to say *no* to something that we want, and I don't like to go without.

This isn't a new concept. All through Scripture starting in the Old Testament, we see God laying out this design of tithing where He invites people, requires people, to give a certain amount of what they have back to God who owns it all in the first place. This idea of tithing and the giving of our finances is not a new idea. We see it all through Scripture. I want to share with you a story from one of Paul's Letters to the Corinthians. Paul wrote two Letters to the Corinthians, and I want to talk about a passage in 2nd Corinthians, chapter 8. Paul is writing to the church there and inviting them to give to another church in Jerusalem. I think it's a beautiful picture of God's intent for our finances and our tithing. Paul says this.

1 And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. **2** In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

How interesting!

3 For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, **4** they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. **5** And they went beyond our expectations; having given themselves first of all to the Lord, they gave themselves by the will of God also to us. **6** So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. **7** But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving. **8** I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. **9** For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

Paul is describing what God has done in the hearts of this Macedonian church. "In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity." I think about that statement and wonder what would cause people who were living in extreme poverty, what would cause the hearts of people experiencing severe trials, to well up in rich generosity. I think about us and I wonder what would need to change about the way we live our lives, what would need to change about the way that we think about our finances, in order for that to be the case for us.

What stuck out to me perhaps more than anything as I thought about this passage was Jesus' life. When Jesus came here, He seemed to spend significant amounts of time reframing the way that people looked at things, didn't He? He showed up in an incredibly religious society full of rules, do's and don'ts and lists and tasks, and He said, "That is what you think religion is. I want

to show you what faith is like.” He showed up in a politically oppressed society that wanted a king, a ruler who was going to fix everything, and He said, “You think you know what a king is? I want to show you what a real king is like.” He reframed the way that they thought and looked at things. That is what Paul is doing in this letter. He is reframing the way that we look at tithing and the giving of our finances.

Paul begins his exhortation toward the Corinthians not with shoulds and do’s and don’ts but by inviting this church to remember an act of grace that they experienced. “And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.” He begins his appeal and plea for them to give by remembering an act of grace that God has already given. We talk about that word *grace*, that which bestows or occasions pleasure, delight, or causes favorable regard. It is used in contrast with debt and works and law. I want you to hold onto that statement, that grace is set in contrast with debt and works and law. One of my favorite commentators, N. T. Wright, says this about this text.

Often when people talk about grace in church circles, they are referring simply to the undeserved love and power which God showers on people in bringing them to faith in the first place and enabling them to live and grow as Christians. That remains central and vital. But Paul also uses the word in what seems to us (though probably not to him) a different way, as in this passage; to refer to what God wants to do, not just in and for Christians, but through them.

Grace compels us so that God can work *through* us. It compels us to move forward in freedom, not out of guilt or duty or fear. That is such a clearer and more accurate and holistic view of grace as intended. Paul urges us as we think about this subject to remember God’s grace that was lavished on us in the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the most gracious and beautiful gift this world will ever see. That’s where Paul begins this plea. As I thought more about this text over the past couple of weeks, I want to suggest that we step into reframing the way that we look at our finances and giving in two simple ways. First, that we would begin to shift our viewpoint and see giving and tithing as an **opportunity to worship and know God as our provider**. Secondly, that we would see giving and tithing as an **opportunity to share in Christ’s work here on earth**.

The text says that these people gave themselves first to the Lord. So many times when we think of worship, we are thinking of singing or reading our Bibles or serving in some way but everything we do from the time we walk through these doors on Sunday until the time the service ends is worship. When we sing, we are worshipping and focusing on God with our voices. When you are listening to me teach and when we are reading Scripture together, we are worshipping as we focus on God’s Word. And when we give, when we write a check and put it in the plate, we are focusing on God and worshipping Him as we give of our finances. It is not simply out of duty, but it is also an opportunity to worship God.

One of my favorite things about giving is this idea of faith. So much of our faith life is unseen, isn’t it? We can’t touch it or measure it. I like numbers. God has a whole Book on Numbers, so they have got to be important. I like things that I can touch and feel and experience. Tithing is a tangible, measurable way for us to express our love and surrender to God with our finances. Beth Moore defines worship as focus. Worshipping through our tithing is turning our focus on our finances over to God and seeing Him as our provider. One of God’s Names in the Old

Testament in the Hebrew Scripture is *Jehovah Jireh*. Genesis 22:14 is literally translated from the Hebrew to read,

14 So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide [*Jehovah Jireh*]. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."

But it is more than that. Hebrew scholars describe God as not just the God who provides when we ask, although He does, He is a God who sees. He sees your need and He makes His help manifested to you. A couple of weeks ago John Crosby talked about the story of a couple of men who had a friend who was paralytic. They had heard about this Jesus guy, that He was healing people and doing all sorts of miracles, and they literally carried their paralytic friend to Him on a mat. They busted through the crowds, went through the roof of a house, and laid him at Jesus' feet because they wanted so badly for this guy's legs to be fixed. They wanted their friend to be healed and they thought Jesus could do it. They brought him to Jesus and what does Jesus say? He says, "My son, your faith has healed you. Your sins are forgiven."

Now I don't know about you, but if I were those friends, I'd say, "That's great, Jesus. Now fix his legs." So often we are convinced that we know what we need, aren't we? I love that story because it is such a beautiful example of Jesus seeing the paralytic's deeper need for forgiveness of sins and of providing in abundance.

I hate not getting what I want and I would bet you feel that way, too. Sometimes there is something I'm convinced I should have, something that I can attain through my finances, nicer clothes, a nicer car, a bigger house, a bigger retirement portfolio, whatever it might be. That is the hard part for us. We tend to attribute God's provision to what we want, not what God knows we need. But over and over I have watched God stand in contrast to what I think I should have, what I want, and provide what He sees that I actually need. It is not simply something that He does, it is literally who He is. As we give of our finances, we have an opportunity to worship and to know and experience God as our provider even though we don't know exactly what that will look like.

The second opportunity we have as we give of our finances is that we can share in Christ's work here on earth. Paul calls this a privilege. The text says, "Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people." Now I don't know about you, but when I think of giving, I don't necessarily jump to privilege. But that's what Paul calls it and that's what it is. As we give and as we share in what Christ is doing all over the world, it is a privilege to share in it. That theme runs all through this text.

As I thought about the ways that I've given in the past and the organizations and individuals I've given my money to, it really has been a privilege. I've gotten to share in what God is doing all over the world as I release my finances to the one who gave them to me in the first place. As I think about you, as I think about this body and CPC, if you are a regular attender or a member of this church, I and we want to unashamedly and unabashedly ask you to give, not out of duty and not out of guilt or obligation, but that you would have the grace and the privilege of sharing what Jesus is doing in and through this church and out in the world.

I think about all the amazing things that CPC is doing right now, like the Living in the Tension groups. CPC has created a space, provided a place of redemption, for the gay community to

feel loved and cared for by the church. CPC has grief recovery groups. We come alongside people grieving from death and dying and hurting and pain, and we comfort them with the love and care of Jesus Christ. We have service-learning projects such as Serving Saturdays where we literally mobilize and send out hundreds and hundreds of students and adults and leaders and volunteers to be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ to a hurting, broken, and desperate world. We are raising up kids and students to follow Jesus, love others and live missionally. We have ministries like Tapestry that help kids with special needs see who Jesus is in ways that they can understand. When you give to CPC, you have the opportunity and privilege of giving to all of these things. We want you to share in what God is doing here, and why wouldn't you want to be a part of that?

I love how Paul handles the text, reminding us that Jesus, who was rich, emptied Himself and became poor. This rich man, Jesus, rich with all of God's blessings, gave the most costly and beautiful sacrifice that this world has ever known and that, my friends, frees us to live in the very same way. If you see me preach, you might agree that what I try to do when I stand up here is to think of a vulnerable place or a vulnerable moment in my life where I've experienced the topic I'm talking about. As I thought about my finances, I couldn't think of a more vulnerable thing than to open up my checkbook and share my finances with you. I didn't know what the numbers were going to be, I didn't know how they would end up, but I decided I was afraid. Then I knew I needed to do it and so I called my accountant and got my tax return from 2012. I looked at every single bank statement and check that I wrote out and every time I gave and added it all up. I did the numbers and I want to share with you what I gave in 2012. In 2012 I gave 11.7 percent of my pretax income away for God's Kingdom work: 6.3 percent of that went to para-church organizations like Campus Crusade for Christ, Young Life, and Treehouse, 3.8 percent went to CPC, 1.6 percent went to special apps like friends going on mission trips or organizations like World Vision, that raise money to bring clean drinking water to kids in Africa so their physical needs can be met and we can introduce them to the person of Jesus Christ.

I share this with you because I want you to know that this isn't just theoretical for us. This isn't just something we think is good for you. When John [Pastor John Crosby] stands up here and when I stand up here, this is something that, yes, we want for you, but we want you to know that we are in it with you. We are living this. As I looked at my giving and reflected on where that money went and thought about what I got, I realized I received an experience. I knew more joy and knew more grace and got to watch God provide far above what I thought I needed. I want that for you. I don't know where you are, whether you are a young person or you are a full-fledged real adult, but I want to leave you with three things to help you figure out what God is calling you to in your next step of faith. What does God want to do in your heart in this area of tithing and finances?

First and foremost, I want you all to ask God to help you experience and know His grace because grace is what causes it to not just be about me. Grace causes it to be *through* me. If you are not sure how to do that, spend some time recalling all the ways that God has blessed you. Spend some time thinking about all the blessings God has shown you in your life. Thank God for who He is and most importantly, remember the life of sin and death that Jesus Christ is redeeming you from, and in that, creating in you a gracious and generous heart.

After you've spent some time in that place, I want you to ask the question, **not how much should I give but how much should I keep** because here is the reality. As followers of Jesus

Christ, all that we have is never really ours anyway. It's been given to us. It is a gift. We get to steward it and distribute it the way that we want but it's really not ours. So reframe that question in your head and ask yourself, not how much should I give but how much should I keep?

Take a step of faith and give of your finances as you worship, experience God, and share in Christ's work on earth. Let me pray.

Jesus, thanks for Your grace and love that comes to us and for us and allows You to listen to us. And as we think about this area and think about what You might be asking of us individually, help us to remember and recall that grace and respond with generous hearts to open up our finances and give them back to You, Jesus, so that we can share in what You are doing here on earth. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.

